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COVER STORIES

A Lot of Show, but Little Substance



There were briefings and consultations, complete with spy-plane pictures and closed-door revelations of secret intercepts. It may have been the most intense national security information campaign since President Kennedy went public with graphic documentation of the Cuban missile threat 20 years ago. The purpose of the blitz was to convince skeptics of the correctness of the Administration's approach to the critical problems of El Salvador and its neighbors—namely, that the struggles in Central America are not simply indigenous revolts but rather are crucial battlegrounds in a broad East-West confrontation.

Facing a credibility gap at home and abroad, the Reagan Administration sought to prove that the fire raging in El Salvador is primarily fueled by Soviet-sponsored subversion spread by Cuban surrogates and the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. In that extreme and simple form, their case is as yet unproved, and indeed—by the very nature of these conflicts—may never be. In a lesser form—that there is significant involvement by Cuba and Nicaragua—the case is almost self-evident.

The campaign, to say the least, had its problems. In fact, the inability of the Administration to line up convincing witnesses would have seemed farcical were the matter not so serious. First there was the so-called "smoking Sandinista," grandly touted as a captured Nicaraguan commando who had helped lead the insurrection in El Salvador. But when police let him loose to show the way to one of his purported contacts, he disappeared into San Salvador's Mexican embassy, which said he was only a student and granted him asylum. Then there were two Nicaraguan air force defectors who were scheduled to bear witness to their country's involvement in El Salvador but by week's end were judged "not ready" to face the press. Finally, there was a young Nicaraguan soldier who was produced by the State Department but then promptly repudiated his previous statements about being trained in Cuba and Ethiopia and having been sent into El Salvador by his government. The U.S. did have solid evidence of a major military buildup in Nicaragua, and former high national security officials were persuaded by still secret intelligence that the Sandinistas were helping the El Salvador rebels. Nonetheless, the blunders

and bad luck over the live witnesses to that subversion greatly undermined the Administration's plausibility.

Presiding over this curious series of public presentations was the prime proponent of the Administration's us-vs.-them world view, Secretary of State Alexander Haig. "This situation is global in character," he told a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee last week. "The problem is worldwide Soviet interventionism that poses an unprecedented challenge to the free world. Anyone attempting to debate the prospects for a successful outcome in

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advisers who were reluctant to detract national attention from the President's economic program. Convinced that this battle would be cleanly and quickly won, the



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